

## WHITE HOUSE MEMO

## *Amid a Rising Death Toll, Trump Leaves the Grieving to Others*

President Trump has led no national mourning for the more than 63,000 Americans who have died from the coronavirus, emphasizing confidence about the future rather than dwelling on the present.



By **Peter Baker**

April 30, 2020

WASHINGTON — One morning this week, President Trump called food sector executives. That afternoon, he met with corporate leaders at the White House. The day before, he paraded small-business owners in the East Room, and the day before that, he showcased executives from retail giants like Walgreens and Walmart in the Rose Garden.

As he presides over the coronavirus pandemic and resulting economic collapse, Mr. Trump has hosted or called many people affected by the devastation, including health company executives, sports commissioners, governors, cruise boat company heads, religious leaders, telecommunications executives and foreign heads of state. One category that has yet to make his list: Americans who have lost someone to the pandemic.

As the death toll from the coronavirus over eight weeks surpasses the total American military casualties in eight years of major combat in Vietnam, Mr. Trump has led no national mourning. In his daily news conferences, he makes only perfunctory references to those who have died as he stiffly reads opening remarks, exhibiting more emotion when grieving his lost economic record than his lost constituents.

Empathy has never been considered one of Mr. Trump's political assets. He views public displays of sadness as weakness and has made a point of stressing resolve, even at the risk of overlooking the deep pain afflicting so much of the country. His favorite words in his televised appearances of recent weeks are "powerful" and "strong." He talks of "incredible" days ahead without dwelling on the miserable days of now. He plans fireworks while Americans plan funerals.

The contrast with his predecessors could hardly be starker. President Ronald Reagan captured the emotions of the nation with his poetic eulogy to the crew of the space shuttle Challenger after it exploded. President Bill Clinton channeled the country's anger and grief after the bombing of an Oklahoma City federal building 25 years ago.

President George W. Bush shed tears and shared hugs with the families of those killed on Sept. 11, 2001, and in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Even the famously stoic President Barack Obama wept openly after the school massacre in Newtown, Conn., and sang "Amazing Grace" at a service for black churchgoers killed by a white supremacist in Charleston, S.C.

"I can think of many presidents whose finest hours included times of mourning," said David Greenberg, a presidential scholar at Rutgers University. "In these and other times, the president binds us as a nation by acknowledging and giving voice to our shared sense of loss, grief and pain and pointing the way to better times ahead. Trump hasn't shown himself capable of this, in my view."

Indeed, Mr. Trump appears reluctant to talk about the more than 63,000 people who have died in the United States from the coronavirus. He mentioned a few times that a friend of his, Stanley Chera, a major New York real estate developer, had been infected and later died, but did not dwell on it for long. In response to a question this week, the

president said that he had also lost a few other friends and had spoken with families of other victims, but he quickly shifted the conversation to distance learning for children.

“I know many stories,” Mr. Trump told reporters. “I’ve spoken to three, maybe, I guess, four families unrelated to me. I did — I lost a very good friend. I also lost three other friends — two of whom I didn’t know as well, but they were friends and people I did business with.” White House officials offered no further details.

To the extent that he discusses the deaths caused by the virus, he generally does so in clinical and at times even self-congratulatory terms. “Our death totals, our numbers per million people, are really very, very strong,” he told reporters on Thursday. “We are very proud of the job we have done.”

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Only after he was asked about former Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr.’s calling on him to lower the flag at the White House to honor the dead did Mr. Trump say he would consider the idea. “I don’t think anybody could feel any worse than I do about all of the death and destruction that’s so needless. Nobody,” he said. “But I also have to make sure that we handle the situation well.”

Judd Deere, a White House spokesman, said the president preferred to emphasize the positive. “Despite Democrats and the media’s coordinated attempts to criticize this president for providing hope and optimism throughout this pandemic, President Trump has delivered a message of comfort, unity and strength while taking bold actions,” he said.

Mr. Trump’s reticence to talk about the human toll of the pandemic conflicts with his occasional willingness to describe the personal impact of America’s wars, visiting Dover Air Force Base to greet the bodies of slain troops and telling audiences later about “crying mothers and wives.”

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In those cases, however, the tragedy fuels his policy positions, bolstering his case to pull American forces out of the Middle East. In this case, focusing on grief from the coronavirus could be politically damaging if the public blames him for playing down the threat of a deadly virus that he had boasted was “something we have tremendous control of” and would “miraculously” disappear on its own.

Instead, he would prefer to talk about China’s mishandling of the original outbreak or how the economy will, he hopes, roar back once stay-at-home orders are lifted. On Thursday, the day after the death toll hit 60,000 in the United States, he spent much of the day railing against prosecutors and defending his first national security adviser, Michael T. Flynn, whom he himself fired for lying about contacts with Russia.

Other presidents considered the mourner in chief role part of their duties, a responsibility to help a nation grappling with tragedy by acknowledging its grief and finding a path forward. Craig Shirley, a longtime Republican operative and Reagan biographer, said presidents like Reagan, Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt connected with everyday people because their self-confidence “gave them the power to exhibit compassion and empathy.”

“It takes a strong man to open his heart,” Mr. Shirley added. “But it also makes a very good and memorable president.”

Few had more experience with that than Roosevelt, who came to office at the depths of the Great Depression when millions were out of work, then presided over World War II with hundreds of thousands of young men sacrificing for their country.

“In virtually all of F.D.R.’s talks, he played a pastoral role,” said Susan Dunn, a Williams College professor and an author of several books on Roosevelt. “He was always empathetic, and even when he was talking about economic dislocation, unemployment, etc., he introduced spiritual notes.”

In recent times, Mr. Bush found himself repeatedly called to comfort a nation beset by terrorism, war, natural disaster and financial collapse. Days after Sept. 11, he stopped by the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center in New York to meet with relatives of those killed in the attacks. He was supposed to visit for a half-hour but stayed for two hours and 20 minutes, hugging and talking with hundreds of devastated people in encounters that were so heart-wrenching that aides and even Secret Service agents cried.

“He was really passionate about connecting with people especially because he took this type of tragedy so personally,” said Eric Draper, the White House photographer who accompanied him. “He used that passion to express his remorse and sadness, but also to connect with people to make them feel better. He would say it wasn’t about him. It was about the presidency and he wanted to share the presidency with them.”

Mr. Obama contended with a series of mass shootings and racial episodes that tore at the country. After the children were gunned down at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Jon Favreau, his chief speechwriter, found the president in the Oval Office struggling to hold his composure, a grief that Mr. Obama then displayed moments later on camera in the briefing room with tears streaming down his face.

“In five years of watching him, I’ve never seen Trump display a shred of empathy or grace towards another human being,” Mr. Favreau said. “I’m not sure he has that capacity, at least he’s never shown it in public.”

Sam Nunberg, a former campaign aide to Mr. Trump, said that sort of display does not come naturally to him. “The president does prefer promoting a public image of strength,” Mr. Nunberg said.

Any contacts with grieving relatives have remained out of sight. When Mr. Trump received a thank-you letter from someone he knew mentioning that the writer’s mother had been told she had the coronavirus, the president called to express concern, according to an official who asked not to be identified.

The only time Mr. Trump has made a point of publicly meeting with victims of the coronavirus came in mid-April when he hosted several survivors in the Cabinet Room, an event that seemed aimed at least in part at proving he was right in promoting hydroxychloroquine, an unproven treatment, since a few of them had taken it.

Since then, a study has cast doubt on the drug and Mr. Trump has stopped mentioning it as often. But David Mangan, one of the survivors invited to the session, said in an interview this week that the president seemed genuinely interested in his guests and made sure that one of them who had Lyme disease saw a White House physician afterward.

“The part of the day that was not captured by any of the media was the personal connection he had with us before the cameras were let in and after the cameras were dismissed from the room,” said Mr. Mangan, 57, a pharmaceutical sales account representative from Hot Springs, Ark., who was joined by his wife, Rachel Mangan, who was also infected by the virus and recovered. “He came across, I think, compassionate. I think he wanted to hear our stories.”

Mr. Mangan said Mr. Trump should do more to show that side of him. “His role should show hope and inspiration, but I also think it should show compassion,” he said. “There are a lot of people that are experiencing a lot of fear, so I do think it has a time and a place.”

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Updated April 11, 2020

### ● What should I do if I feel sick?

If you've been exposed to the coronavirus or think you have, and have a fever or symptoms like a cough or difficulty breathing, call a doctor. They should give you advice on whether you should be tested, how to get tested, and how to seek medical treatment without potentially infecting or exposing others.

### ● When will this end?

This is a difficult question, because a lot depends on how well the virus is contained. A better question might be: “How will we know when to reopen the country?” In an American Enterprise Institute report, Scott Gottlieb, Caitlin Rivers, Mark B. McGallan, Lauren Sikis and Crystal Watson staked out four

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